



PLAYING ‘THE SECTARIAN CARD’ IN A SECTARIANIZED NEW MIDDLE EAST



In this article, we are revisiting the classic debate on the durability and dynamics of Arab authoritarianism in light of the recent ‘sectarianization’ of Middle East politics.

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Thus, the Arab uprisings have not only impacted large parts of the Arab world. Since 2011, they have also left their mark on scholarship about Arab politics, which has been preoccupied with discussing the uprisings and their implications for a more or less ‘new Middle East’.¹ As part of this discussion, new topics and approaches have emerged on the scholarly agenda and at the same time it has been discussed whether old theories and assumptions about Middle East politics should be rejected, revisited or revised.²

An example of this is the debate on Arab authoritarianism, which in recent years has intersected with the debate on the causes and consequences of the current ‘sectarianization’ Middle East politics. By sectarianization, a very contested concept,³ we mean ‘a process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve popular mobilization around (religious) identity markers’⁴ and in the current context, are referring specifically to some sort of Sunni- Shia cleavage

instrumentalized by actors in power struggles. We examine the issue by exploring three interrelated questions.

First, we ask whether and how it is possible to identify a sectarian dimension in the techniques employed by authoritarian regimes as part of their regime survival strategy.

Based on a recognition of how authoritarian regimes and their workings may differ from each other, we are secondly asking whether authoritarian regimes’ use of the ‘sectarian card’ can be part of different kinds of regime survival strategies.

Finally, we adopt a longer-term perspective by asking whether and how a sectarian instrumentalization of institutions matters for authoritarian resilience in the long term. Before we turn to addressing these three questions (based on both synchronic comparisons and diachronic within-case studies), the next two sections provide a brief overview of the evolution of the scholarly debate on Middle East authoritarianism before



and after the beginning of the 2011 Arab uprisings, and how it has become increasingly intersected with the debate on sectarianism.

A RESILIENT DEBATE

After the post-Cold War 1990s hopeful, but also rather teleological search for signs of how the Middle East was democratizing like other regions, at the turn of the new millennium this 'democracy-spotting' was met with growing criticism. Instead, Middle Eastern scholars were called on to enter the 'era of post-democratization' and focus less on 'what ought to be' and more on 'what in fact is'.⁵

From this 'post-democratization' perspective, the answer to the question about 'what in fact is' was an apparent durable but also dynamic authoritarianism.⁶ In the decade before 2011, this issue figured so prominently on the scholarly agenda that some talked about a 'renaissance in the study of authoritarianism'.⁷ This debate did not only give rise to a major and fertile debate on the renewal, resilience, endurance and robustness of Arab authoritarianism. It also provided a growing awareness of the variety of different forms of authoritarianism, including upgraded, monarchical, (post) populist, and liberalized autocracies, and of the multiple techniques employed by these regimes in relation to elections, civil society, authoritarian bargains, overt repression, black knights as well as various forms of identity politics, where societal groups were in/excluded based on identity.⁸

However, in the early phase of the Arab uprisings with the fall of authoritarian rulers such as Egypt's Mubarak and Tunisia's Ben Ali – allegedly *the* prototypes of successful 'upgraded' authoritarianism – many observers thought they saw the 'fourth wave of democratization' unfolding.⁹ In turn, 'durable authoritarianism' was declared to be nothing but a mirage.¹⁰ This optimistic position

was soon countered by pessimists, calling attention to how the majority of Arab regimes were and would in the foreseeable future likely continue to be autocratic as they had shown an increasing ability to adapt to the new challenges.¹¹ Today, most – including previous optimists¹² – agree that it was premature to write off authoritarianism as a thing of the past and to declare the existing rich literature on Arab authoritarianism as obsolete. This however does not mean that the Middle East has just experienced an authoritarian restoration in terms of some sort of 'Mubarakism without Mubarak'.¹³ Instead, we may be witnessing the rise of a 'new authoritarianism' validating the insight from the pre-2011 'post-democratization' debate about how it is just as important to examine changes in as changes of authoritarianism.¹⁴

A SECTARIANIZED NEW MIDDLE EAST

In this debate about dimensions of continuity and change in authoritarianism in the Arab world after 2011, one of the aspects that has received much attention concerns what Hashemi and Postel have coined as a 'sectarianization' of Middle East politics in the wake of the Arab uprisings.¹⁵ In a gloomy prediction, Heydemann, for instance, states that the 'future of Arab authoritarianism will be darker, more repressive, more sectarian and even more deeply resistant to democratization than in the past'.¹⁶

The question about sectarianism is far from a completely new topic in debates on Middle East politics. However, the nature of the debate has changed in recent years.¹⁷ In the decade before the beginning of the Arab uprisings, the main controversy concerned the question of whether 'conflicts within Islam will shape the future'¹⁸ or whether the notion of a 'Shiite Crescent' was more a 'myth than reality'.¹⁹ Today, the contending issue is less about whether or not sectarianism matters,

as even previous skeptics now acknowledge that 'sectarianism is a real factor in politics'.²⁰ Instead, attention is to a larger extent devoted to questions regarding the causes of this 'sectarianization' and its implication for various dimensions of politics in a 'new Middle East', including the durability and dynamism of authoritarianism.

In this way, the recent sectarianism debate has become intersected with the 'classic' debate on Arab authoritarianism. For the remainder of this article, we are entering this nexus between authoritarianism and sectarianism in order to explore whether and how these two debates in combination can contribute to our understanding of Arab authoritarianism in a 'sectarianized' new Middle East. We do so through a discussion of the three questions outlined in the introduction. By drawing on examples from various parts of the region, we address whether it is possible to identify a sectarian dimension in the techniques employed by authoritarian regimes as part of their regime survival strategy and what it may look like. We then make a synchronic comparison of how the Kuwaiti and Bahraini regimes – in quite different ways – are using sectarianism as part of their regime survival strategies. Finally, we make a diachronic within-case analysis of Syria in order to examine whether and how a sectarian instrumentalization of institutions matters for authoritarian resilience over the long term.

WAYS OF PLAYING THE SECTARIAN CARD

One of the insights from the classic 'post-democratization' debate concerns how authoritarian regimes often employ a large variety of techniques as part of their regime survival strategies. If authoritarianism has become *more sectarian* as suggested by Heydemann, this poses the question of whether this insight also applies to how regimes are 'playing the sectarian card' in the sense of how they are manipulating sectarianism

in order to stay in power.²¹ In other words, to what extent is it possible to identify a sectarian dimension in more of the regime survival techniques employed by authoritarian regimes? By looking at the practices of different authoritarian regimes across the region before, during and after the Arab uprisings, it turns out that sectarianism has become an important dimension for a number of regimes. It also becomes clear that a variety of authoritarian techniques can involve a sectarian



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dimension ranging from the design of different kinds of state institutions to how regimes manipulate societal dynamics.

One kind of institutions are those in the *military/security sector*, whose loyalty is vital for the ability of a regime to repress citizens by force if necessary.²² Recruitment to military, security or intelligence services can, for instance, be based on selective sectarian criteria based on the assumption that some groups are more loyal. In Bahrain, where the al Khalifa regime is Sunni, but the population majority is Shia, 98 percent of the security apparatus are Sunni²³ and in Syria where the majority is Sunni, the Alawis dominate it.²⁴ Regimes can also hire foreign mercenaries based on sectarian criteria as in Bahrain, where these are mainly Sunnis from countries like Pakistan, Yemen and Jordan.²⁵ They can also invite intervention by foreign supporters, as in Syria, where the regime is supported by Afghani, Iranian or Iraqi Shiite militias.²⁶ Yet another example is the mobilization of paramilitary sectarian networks like the Syrian *shabiha* or Shia-militias in Iraq.²⁷

There can also be a sectarian dimension in how regimes design representative political institutions and engineer elections as a way of 'divide and rule'. As Justin Gengler explains, these institutions are important as their design structures the nature of contestation and cooperation between citizens and how they relate to the state.²⁸ In places such as Bahrain, Kuwait or Lebanon,²⁹ electoral laws and districts are thus carefully engineered as part of a 'sectarian gerrymandering' in order to secure a specific balance representing members of different sects or to ensure that specific groups are underrepresented in the parliaments.³⁰ In some districts in Bahrain, one Sunni vote, for instance, equals 21 Shia votes.³¹ Political institutions and elections can also be designed to encourage political competition based on latent social distinctions – such as sectarian identities – rather than (cross-sectarian) issue preferences, for instance by banning formal political parties.

In some places, it is also possible to identify a *sectarian political economy* in the design of *welfare institutions*. In a critique of the notion of a 'universal rentier social contract', Gengler has, for instance, showed how rent-based regimes in places like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, instead of deploying limited resources inefficiently upon the whole society, are employing a 'targeted redistribution': a finite category of loyal citizens, usually based on sectarian criteria, are rewarded. They therefore get direct economic-cum-political stake in defending the existing system, while the remaining population is excluded from these benefits.³²

As a way of legitimizing a ruling regime, various institutions, including religious ones, can also be used to promote a selective *nation-building narrative* centred around the regime and a specific sect, while other groups and events are written out of the official narrative about the nation. Thus, in Bahrain the national narrative accentuates the country's Sunni heritage. At the same time, it

deemphasizes the time before the arrival in 1783 of the ruling Sunni al Khalifa family to the island, which at that time was predominantly Shia and an important part of the Shiite world. In a discussion of heritage politics in Bahrain, Thomas Fibiger, for instance, points out how the story about Shia shrines is not told at the Bahraini National Museum, and how some of the historical graves of famous figures in Shia history – just like a number of Shia mosques – were tarnished or destroyed as a response to the 2011 uprisings.³³

In addition to the design of various state institutions, regimes may also try to engineer a society's *demographic composition* based on a sectarian logic. In the 1970s and '80s, Kuwait, for



The al Khalifa regime of Bahrain has deliberately tried to spur sectarian conflict.



instance, granted citizenship to more than 200 000 Sunni tribesmen, first in order to marginalize Nasserists and later to dilute the electoral influence of Shias.³⁴ In Bahrain, the regime has naturalized foreign Sunnis in return for police or military service – up to 50 000 per year.³⁵ At the same time, the regime stripped citizenship from almost 500 mainly Shia Bahrainis who have been outspoken about democratic reforms and human rights abuses, including Bahrain's most prominent Shiite cleric, Sheikh Isa Qassim.

Besides this demographic engineering, it is also possible to detect a sectarian dimension in how authoritarian regimes try to influence societal dynamics by cultivating fear and seeding divisions and discord among different groups in the society in order to avoid crosscutting issue-based coalitions. When it comes to civil society, this is reflected in a selective treatment of different NGOs

and a de facto acceptance or even promotion of 'sectarianism from below' by so-called 'sectarian identity entrepreneurs', who capitalize on making sectarian identities the defining marker of a particular segment of society.³⁶ In a study of sectarian identities in Lebanese civil society, Bassel Salloukh and Janine Clark for instance show how sectarian elites accept or even promote NGOs based on vertical sectarian ties, whereas cross/non/anti-sectarian NGOs are harassed or marginalized.³⁷ Similarly, during the 2011 uprisings in Bahrain, the regime was very keen not only on cracking down on Shia dissidents, but also punishing those Sunni groups and individuals who had rejected the official 'sectarian narrative' and joined ranks with the Shia-led opposition and their calls for cross-sectarian cooperation and democratic reforms. At the same time, the regime supported the rise of the pan-Sunni block, The National Unity Gathering, and, according to some reports, used the so-called *baltajiyya*, agent provocateurs or thugs, to stir up sectarian tensions in mixed-sect neighbourhoods.³⁸ At the *broader societal level*, not only 'sectarian identity entrepreneurs' but also traditional and, not least, new social media constitute important tools for the regimes.³⁹ These have proved useful to deflect attention from non-sectarian issues concerning corruption or political rights, delegitimize the opposition, and promote fear of sectarian instability, which according to Benstead will make people less inclined to support demands for democracy.⁴⁰ In Syria, Bashar al-Asad, for instance portrayed the 2011 uprising as a violent sectarian plot led by Sunni *takfirists* and himself as the protector of not only the Alawis, but also other non-Sunni sects and even secular Sunnis. In Saudi Arabia, the calls for demonstrations on the 'Day of Rage' in March 2011 were denounced as a Shia conspiracy against the Sunni majority.⁴¹ In the official narrative in Bahrain, the oppositions' demands for democratic

reforms were similarly reframed as a sectarian plot led by an Iran-backed fifth column intent on installing Shia theocratic rule with no place for Sunnis.

AUTHORITARIAN REGIME SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

While the previous section illustrated how sectarianism can be part of a wide range of different authoritarian techniques, this section takes its point of departure in another awareness in the post-democratization literature. Instead of only making a distinction between democracies versus autocracies, it is just as important to be attentive to how authoritarianism comes in a variety of forms and that different authoritarian regimes may work in quite different ways. Against this background, it is natural to ask whether authoritarian regimes that are playing 'the sectarian card' are necessarily following the same regime survival strategy, even while they share the overall goal of staying in power? In order to address this question, this section compares Kuwait and Bahrain, who at first sight appear very similar. Both are Gulf monarchies with a population consisting of Shia and Sunni Muslims and ruled by Sunni royal families, who have used sectarianism as part of their regime survival strategy. Still, they differ from each other when it comes to how these regimes are using sectarianism and for what purpose.

Bahrain, which figured prominently in the previous section, represents – along with for instance Saudi Arabia – a regime with a pronounced top-down sectarian strategy. Thus, the al Khalifa regime has deliberately tried to spur sectarian conflict and narrowly presents itself as a protector of the Sunnis, whom they try to co-opt, whereas Shias are violently repressed. When it comes to Kuwait, the Sunni al-Sabah ruling family shares the same fundamental goal of regime survival as their Sunni colleagues in Bahrain. They therefore

also fear the emergence of a cross-sectarian opposition with democratic demands. On closer inspection it becomes clear, however, that Sabahs have adopted a very different strategy than the al Khalifas, though sectarianism still figures as an important dimension.

Instead of overt repression and top-down sectarianism, the Sunni regime in Kuwait has not only presented itself as an *arbiter* between and *protector* of various groups in a divided and increasingly sectarianized Kuwaiti society. It has also relied on a quite distinct form of *co-option* – namely of the Shia minority – as part of an attempt to balance the various groups in society and to split the opposition. This strategy is an outcome of two trends in Kuwait. Firstly, the regime has been concerned about a rising and increasingly critical Sunni opposition from tribes and Islamists. At the same time, the Shia minority, some of which have also been critical of the regime and demanded reforms, has been worried about the intensified sectarianism at the societal level, not least among some Sunni tribes and Islamists, where anti-Shia orientations have gained ground in recent decades.⁴³ The Kuwaiti regime has used this fear among the Shias to co-opt them, partly by offering ministry positions and easing restrictions on Shia religious spaces in return for loyalty. As a result, Shia MPs have become important voting allies of the government, and in the mass protests in 2012, they remained loyal to the regime.⁴⁴

Yet there are numerous indications of how the Sunni Kuwaiti regime's accommodating policy towards the Shias has less to do with genuine democratic or ecumenical views than an authoritarian regime's strategic calculations. The regime has been willing to crack down on instances of strong oppositional Shia voices, has obstructed cross-sectarian cooperation – such as the late 1990s Popular Action Block that included li-

beral, tribal, Shia, and Sunni Islamist figures – and seems to turn a blind eye to growing anti-Shia sentiments at the societal level. Against this background, it seems fair to conclude that although the drivers of sectarianism may be less top-down in Kuwait than in Bahrain, the regime still uses sectarianism as part of their regime survival strategy to split the opposition and balance various societal groups.

THE CHANGING IMPACT OF SECTARIANISM

The impact of sectarianism on the viability of authoritarianism in the Middle East must be assessed, not only in respect to the short term utility for authoritarian leaders from instrumentalizing it but also by paying attention to the longer term impact of instrumentalism on the stability and effectiveness of governing institutions. This has not only varied among seemingly similar authoritarian regimes but also in the same regime at different periods of its evolution. In the following, this is illustrated through a diachronic within-case analysis that compares the impact of sectarianism on authoritarian governance in Syria during Hafiz al-Asad and his son Bashar al-Asad.

The relation of sectarianism and authoritarian institutions can be framed in terms of the neo-patrimonial form of authoritarianism that dominates the Middle East, in which personal leadership is combined with bureaucratic structures. While the construction of such regimes typically instrumentalizes sectarianism or other particularistic identities as *assabiyeh* binding the core elite to the leader, whether this becomes an obstacle to the construction of institutions consolidating a stable base of regime power varies considerably. It arguably depends on the *balance* of personal and bureaucratic authority is a particular case: the more patrimonial the regime, the more likely sectarianism practices – such as the sectarian recruitment of military/security

forces and encouraging inter-sectarian conflict to divide and rule – will debilitate bureaucratic rationality and enervate the institutions needed to incorporate cross-class, cross-sectarian coalitions. However, if the bureaucratic/institutional side of neo-patrimonialism is sufficiently developed, e.g. some bureaucratic recruitment by merit or ruling parties recruiting across sectarian lines, the more inclusive they will be and the more sectarianism can be diluted so that it does not become a threat to long term stability. The inclusiveness of authoritarian regimes has also rested on what has been called a populist social contract in which political loyalty is traded for entitlements regardless of communal background. By contrast, in *post-populist regimes* that exclude the lower classes and concentrate patronage resources in the hands of regime-connected crony capitalists – with different sects usually disproportionately represented in both strata – the inclusiveness of institutions tends to shrink, at the risk of long-term stability.

The Ba'thist regime, neo-patrimonialism and sectarianism: This Weberian understanding enables us to make sense of the changing interaction of identity and authoritarianism in the evolution of rule in Ba'thist Syria. The Ba'th regime was institutionalized under Hafiz al-Asad as a populist version of neo-patrimonialism, a hybrid that both exploited and yet also pursued other practices which diluted sectarianism. The patrimonial president appointed trusted fellow Alawis to command elite army units and the security forces. Also, however, senior Sunni politicians and Ba'thi officers in his inner circle, while not having independent bases of support, still incorporated their own clientele networks; Alawi officers also had Sunni business partners, as part of a 'military-mercantile complex' centered on Damascus. 'Sectarian arithmetic' ensured representation of all sectarian groups in the party

politburo and council of ministers. At the base, a cross-sectarian rural constituency was incorporated, with the party penetrating and co-opting Sunni as well a minority peasantry, particularly land reform peasants. The populist social contract traded political loyalty for benefits, regardless of sectarian affiliation: free higher education and government jobs for the salaried middle class; job security for industrial workers; land for peasants; subsidized food for the urban masses and considerable upward mobility for rurals of all sects. The Ba'th's representation of itself as the defender of the Arabs against Zionism and imperialism, on the basis of a supra-state Arab identity meant to subsume sectarian differences, conferred some legitimacy on the re-



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gime. The regime incorporated about half the population (minorities, state employed middle class, land reform peasants, the Damascene Sunni bourgeoisie); the other half that felt excluded, on the other hand, sympathized with the main durable opposition to the regime, the Muslim Brotherhood. The robustness of the Ba'th's power building formula proved itself during the Muslim Brotherhood insurgency (1978–1982): while explicitly framed in sectarian terms – that is, as a movement representing the Sunni majority against heretical ruling minorities, the Brotherhood's message remained largely urban in appeal since most Sunni peasants remained incorporated into the Ba'th constituency via pro-peasant agrarian reforms.⁴⁵ The regime used loyal Alawi troops – but also tribal recruited ones – to brutally repress the uprising, particularly in the

sack of Hama in 1982. The *Ikhwan* uprising left a permanent mark, a desire for revenge by Sunni militants and fear of such revanchism by the regime, which sharply limited its capacity to become more inclusive. The regime thus exploited sectarian ties, and in this sense reproduced sectarianism, but sectarian identities were not officially allowed to take overt political form, with Arab nationalism the inclusive identity that legitimized Ba'ath rule. And, the regime remained cross-sectarian enough to dilute and repress sectarian sentiments even if these persisted in covert forms.⁴⁶

The Bashar al-Asad Period: Debilitation of the Cross-sectarian Coalition: Hafiz's regime had depended on the availability of considerable rent and when under his son, Bashar as-Asad, it declined, the regime adopted neo-liberal policies meant to attract investors. In the process, it evolved into a post-populist version of authoritarianism based on a state-crony capitalist alliance that was both highly resistant to democratization and vulnerable to communal conflict. First, concentrating power in Bashar's hands meant pushing his father's old Sunni barons out of power, losing with them their clientele networks among Sunni elites; some, such as Vice-President Khaddam went into opposition. Second, the concentration of the new business opportunities from the opening to private/foreign capital in the hands of the presidential family, especially the president's cousin, Rami Makhoul, alienated many of the former Sunni business clients of the regime.⁴⁷ Third, the running down of the welfare state and cutting of food and fuel subsidies and agricultural prices, combined with the cumulative effect of population growth on fixed land and devastating drought, cost the regime the support of its peasant and lower class constituencies. The result was that while the patrimonial core of the regime became more



Hama after the massacre in 1982, with the destroyed Al-Nuri Mosque, on the western bank of the Orontes River, next to the Hama Castle.

sectarian, the societal penetration of regime institutions, such as the party organization, contracted and the concentration of patronage shrunk its co-optative capacity. Social mobility became sharply skewed in the hands of a few regime insiders and clients.

Others experienced downward pressure on their living standards, and many of the losers came to see sectarian discrimination at work. For example, rumors spread that Alawi teachers were taking the jobs of Sunnis in Raqqah and Hassakah, where the regime was ineffective, if not negligent, in addressing the devastation of the great drought of 2008–2010. Symptomatic of popular resentment of Alawi crony capitalists was the 2011 attack by protestors in Dera on the offices of Rami Makhoul's Syriatel. At the same time, the regime's encouragement of non-political Islam, first began under Hafiz, had enabled the spread of Islamism beyond its former concentration in the cities into the suburbs and countryside where it shrunk

Ba'thism's popular base and prepared the ideological ground for rural based Islamist insurrection.⁴⁸

Once the Syria uprising evolved into armed insurgency, the regime reconfigured itself to fight a civil war, turning into a more coercive, exclusivist – and de-centralized – form of neo-patrimonialism. All those among the political elite advocating compromise with the opposition were purged and the regime core shrunk to the Asad family and the inner security and military chiefs. As the army was debilitated by mostly Sunni defections, its Alawi composition was accentuated, with much of the community incorporated into the military and state apparatus. Shrinking state resources were targeted at loyalists and loyal regions; and responsibility for security was decentralized to local, often sectarian, militias. Most of the opposition was demonized as terrorists and jihadists; the opposition, in response to regime violence against it, was militarized and Islamized, deploying sectarian discourses that drove the minorities into dependence for security on the regime. The external intervention of sectarian fighters on both sides and the security dilemma, in which all came to depend on their own community against the



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sectarian 'other,' spread sectarianism to the grass-roots of society. Thus, the collapse of inclusive institutions shrank the social base of the state, for which a vastly increased use of coercion came to substitute, with both greatly intensifying the sectarian and territorial bifurcation of the country. The regime was able to survive in good part owing

to massive intervention of its Russian, Iranian and Shia Arab allies on its behalf.⁴⁹

The evolution of Ba'thist authoritarianism is typical of the construction of authority in the Middle East's multi-sectarian states, both in its instrumentalization of sectarianism and in the considerable variations in the extent to which this was an asset or obstacle to the creation of authoritarian power. For it to be an asset, patrimonial practices – with sect instrumentalized to generate elite solidarity around leaders – have to be combined with enough bureaucratic capacity to include cross-sectarian coalitions. However, this delicate balance is easily upset, particularly with the turn to post-populist versions of authoritarianism. Thus, the changing inclusiveness of Ba'thist institutions and political economy strategies helps explain first the muting of and thereafter the inflaming of sectarianism in Syria, and the parallel move from robust statehood to at least partial state failure.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, we have revisited the classic debate on durability and dynamism of authoritarianism in the light of the recent 'sectarianization' of Middle East politics. What conclusions can we draw from the literature and our cases for the relationship of sectarianism to authoritarian resilience?

First, sectarianism is widely instrumentalized in the region's sectarian-divided societies, with apparently considerable utility for rulers, at least in the short run, in co-opting constituents and dividing and ruling populations. But there are considerable variations in the short-term techniques employed, with various mixtures of coercion, divide and rule tactics, and cooptation (either targeted solely to supportive sects or more inclusive).

Second, the impact of sectarian instrument-

alization on institutions (and the impact of the latter on sectarianism) matters for authoritarian resilience over the longer term. Institutions, such as parliaments and parties, that enjoy some real internal political life and can therefore effectively coopt/include constituencies reduce the need for coercion; moreover, in order to coerce effectively one must have loyal constituents; it takes institutions to coopt broader social forces, particularly coalitions cutting across sect and class, and if they can effectively include roughly half the population, regimes are much more able to repress or deter opposition from the excluded half. Syria under Hafiz and Kuwait appear to have had effective institutions; when these declined, as in Bahrain after the dismissal of the parliament and in Bashar's Syria, with the debilitation of the Ba'th party, inclusion contracted and coercion became more necessary; but this may only provoke revolution or costly civil war.

Once regimes are weakened in this way they become vulnerable to trans-state interference. Then, whether they can survive depends on whether the balance of intervention is such that supportive allies can outbid hostile powers and shift the internal power struggle on behalf of the regime. Thus the Saudi/UAE intervention in Bahrain saved the Bahraini regime. Likewise, the Hizbollah/Iran/Shia militia intervention in Syria, later followed by Russia, shifted the balance of intervention that was initially against Bashar al-Asad, back in his favor. Needless to say, the interventions have been driven in good part by the regional power struggle between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran. Such interventions come at the cost of inflamed sectarian polarization over the longer term.

Third, if we ask why there are such variations in the tactics of sectarian instrumentalization and the balance between inclusion and exclusion, several factors suggest themselves. Inclusion is as-

sisted by a populist social contract and regimes that come to power in popular revolts form below, such as Ba'thist Syria, will opt to legitimize themselves in such terms. Whether or not there are sharp polarizing sectarian cleavages that can be exploited, as in Bahrain, but less so in Kuwait, may shape regime strategies, too. The availability of resources, of course, also matters: compared to Hafiz's Syria and Kuwait, Bashar's Syria and Bahrain enjoyed much less rent to serve as patronage, hence less co-optative capability. Finally, the existing global order affects Middle East's elite strategies and options. In the period of Cold War, socialism and Keynesian capitalism, resource availability and an egalitarian normative climate favored populism and inclusion. The current neo-liberal world order, with its legitimization of vast inequalities, IMF-driven austerity for the masses and (perhaps inadvertent) promotion of crony capitalism via pressures for privatization, encourages exclusion and indeed is associated with crowing communal conflict worldwide.⁵⁰

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- 1 Fawaz Gerges, eds. *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- 2 Jillian Schwedler, «Comparative Politics and the Arab Uprisings», *Middle East Law and Governance* 7, no. 1 (October 2015): 141–152; Michelle Pace, and Francesco Cavatorta, «The Arab Uprisings in Theoretical Perspective – An Introduction», *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no. 2 (July 2012): 125–138; Morten Valbjørn, «Reflections on Self-Reflections – On framing the analytical implications of the Arab uprisings for the study of Arab politics», *Democratization* 22, no. 2 (March 2015): 218–238; Morten Valbjørn, «Strategies for Reviving the International

- Relations/Middle East Nexus after the Arab Uprisings», PS: Political Science & Politics 50, no. 3 (July 2017): 647–651.
- 3 As we have discussed further elsewhere, sectarianism a highly complex concept, which qualifies as an example of what Gallie (1956) once called 'essentially contested concepts'. These are concepts, which we all think that we know, but on closer inspection, it turns out that the concept is associated with a variety of different meanings and it is unlikely that it is possible to reach a final agreement about the 'true' meaning of the concept. While sectarianism today is often associated with the Middle East and Islam, the concept emerges from a debate in religious studies on divisions within European Christianity between the 'church' and religious groups outside of the church, 'sects'. See Adam Gaiser, «A Narrative Identity Approach to Islamic Sectarianism», in *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, eds. Nader A. Hashemi and Danny Postel (London: Hurst Publishers, 2017), 61–75. When the concept has been applied to a Middle Eastern context, it has been used in a variety of ways. Sometimes it has referred to divisions between groupings within the same faith (for example Shia versus Sunni Muslims as the case is in the present paper); at other times, it concerns relations between groupings of different faith (for example Muslims versus Coptic Christians as in Egypt); at still other times, it refers at the same time to both intra- and inter-faith relations (for example Shia-Muslims versus Sunni-Muslims versus Maronite Christians in Lebanon); others use sectarianism refers about ethnic-religious groups (for example, Shia/Sunni Muslim Kurds versus Arab Shia Muslims versus Arab Sunni Muslims in Iraq) and finally sectarianism is sometimes used in an even broader sense to refer to groups with a 'a shared identity, belief or ideology'. Adding to this confusion, it also differs whether sectarianism refers to a feeling, a policy or an institutionalized arrangement just as it is much discussed whether and if so how religion plays a significant role. The scope of the present article does not allow an in-depth discussion of this contested concept, so we are instead using sectarianism in a deliberately broad and vague sense referring to (constructed/manipulated) divisions among Shia and Sunni Muslims. For a longer discussion of the term, see also Fanar Haddad, «Sectarianism' and Its Discontents in the Study of the Middle East», *Middle East Journal*, 71, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 363–382.
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